



GREAT LAKES  
**EQUITY**  
CENTER

## **Equity by Design**

Rethinking Quality:  
Foregrounding Equity in  
Definitions of “High Quality”  
Educators

**Rodney S. Whiteman**

**Kathleen A. K. Thorius**

**Seena M. Skelton**

**Tiffany Kyser**

# Rethinking Quality: Foregrounding Equity in Definitions of “High Quality” Educators

Since 2001, the US Department of Education (USDOE) has taken steps to provide every child with high quality educators. This effort began with No Child Left Behind, Title I, U.S.C. Sec. 1111 (*No Child Left Behind*, 2001) (NCLB), which required states to “ensure that poor and minority children are not taught at higher rates than other children by inexperienced, unqualified, or out-of-field teachers.” In 2006, the USDOE established criteria to assist states in meeting this requirement. In order to ensure that all students achieve high standards for academic performance, the 2006 criteria expanded

emphasis on staffing all classrooms with not just highly qualified teachers, but with highly qualified and highly effective teachers (Spellings, 2006).

In July 2014, the USDOE reinvested its commitment to ensuring equitable distribution of high quality educators and informed Chief State School Officers of a requirement to submit new State Educator Equity Plans that emphasize the analysis of stakeholders input and data about the root causes of observed inequities in the placement of high quality educators (Duncan, 2014). This was one of several possible moves to ensure the equitable distribution of high quality educators so that students from low income households and racial/ethnic/linguistic minority students are not taught by disproportionately high rates of unqualified teachers (McNeil, 2014). A great deal of research exists on teacher distribution (e.g., Guarino, Santibañez, & Daley, 2006), but much focuses either on distribution mechanisms or on a particular definition of teacher quality. As state education agencies (SEAs) and local education agencies (LEAs) put effort into equitably distributing high quality educators, definitions of teacher quality must remain at the forefront of national education discourse.

As one of ten regional Equity Assistance Centers, we are particularly interested in examining contemporary definitions of educator quality, as well as the implications of those

## KEY TERMS

**Achievement-centric models**—Ways of thinking about the outcomes of schooling and teacher quality that privilege student achievement and marginalize other possible education outcomes.

**Critical pedagogy**—An orientation toward pedagogy that begins with the belief that education is inherently political; considers social, cultural, cognitive, economic, and political contexts of schooling; and challenges students and educators to enact social change and to advance democracy and equality (Kincheloe, 2004; Shor, 1993).

**Equity**—“Educational equity occurs when a school system has created policies, curricula, and a social culture that is representative of all students, such that all students have both encouragement and access to engage in high quality learning experiences” (Great Lakes Equity Center, 2012).

**Value-added models (VAM)**—Complex statistical formulas that attempt to determine educator or school quality by isolating an individual teacher’s or a school’s contributions to student learning, as measured by standardized achievement tests. VAMs are a product of achievement-centric models of schooling and teacher quality.

definitions. A definition that explicitly considers equity will support SEAs and LEAs as they create opportunities to learn for all students regardless of race, gender, and national origin through the development and distribution of high quality teachers. In this brief we provide educational stakeholders with a set of research-informed considerations for policy and practice by exploring and expanding upon existing teacher quality frameworks. (e.g., Guarino, Santibañez, & Daley, 2006), and by foregrounding equity within three key domains: personal qualities, practice, and student outcomes.

**As state education agencies (SEAs) and local education agencies (LEAs) put effort into equitably distributing high quality educators, definitions of teacher quality must remain at the forefront of national education discourse.**

## Policy, Politics, and Definitions of “High Quality Educator”

The definition of what makes a “high quality” educator matters because it informs how educators are prepared and credentialed, how they are expected to operate in schools, and how they are evaluated (Tefera, Thorius, & Artiles, 2014). However, such definitions include everything from educator disposition and knowledge, and classroom teaching activities, to outcomes measured by achievement tests. Policies and evaluation models vary in emphasis of these three dimensions. It is often assumed an educator teaching courses in which she is certified and with greater teaching experience is a higher quality teacher because she has expertise in the subject area and an extensive set of instructional strategies.

Over time, researchers have questioned whether years of experience and credentials (e.g., a master’s degree) are sufficient indicators of educator quality, arguing student achievement is what matters and a weak link between students’ achievement and educators’ years of experience or education level (Hanushek & Rivkin, 2006).

Drawing from the field of economics, educator quality is measured in value-added models that attempt to link inputs influencing student achievement (e.g., student demographics, school characteristics) to outputs representing student achievement (e.g., test scores) in a linear arrangement (see Figure 1, adapted from Kennedy, 2007.) With these models, it is assumed that an educator’s contribution can be isolated from all other factors influencing student



**Figure 1. Linear and achievement-centric model of educator quality. Adapted from Kennedy, 2007.**

achievement, and the educator's measured contribution represents her quality. Increasingly, value-added models based on student achievement are being used to sort educators into levels of quality (Amrein-Beardsley, 2008). Though student achievement is not the only indicator of quality, test scores are certainly an important part of how quality is defined, particularly in some interpretations of the USDOE July 2014 guidance letter (see, for example, McNeil, 2014).

### **The Case for Moving Beyond Achievement-Centric Models of Teacher Quality**

The achievement-centric model of educator quality comes from a belief that students' well-being is best realized when it positions them to thrive in a world characterized by private property rights, free markets, and free trade (Harvey, 2005). From this standpoint, students must be supported to develop the knowledge to be self-sufficient, entrepreneurial, and not dependent upon government. The primary purpose of schooling then becomes to facilitate students' preparation for postsecondary career and education and developing a skilled workforce (Spring, 1998, 2011). Yet, such a stance has profound implications for the activity of schooling and the definition of educator quality.

#### ***Effects on schooling and on educators.***

An achievement-centric model requires standardization of pedagogy, curriculum, and testing so that families can be informed consumers of educational services (Tefera et al., 2014). This stance assumes that families

value "college and career readiness" as signaled by student test scores more than other possible educational outcomes. Additionally, using achievement testing to determine school and educator quality creates incentives to narrow curriculum only to items that will be on tests, to use instructional time to practice test-taking skills, and in extreme cases, cheat (Hanushek & Rivkin, 2010).

***Effects on students and equity.*** The achievement-centric model also has profound implications for students and equity. Reducing schooling to standardized activities requires adopting a "one size fits all" approach. Such a model feeds into deficit thinking in which students who do not respond to the standardized approach are labeled at-risk or dis/abled in some way (McDermott & Varenne, 1999; Tefera et al., 2014).

When applying a standardized approach, the students who respond best are those who share cultural similarities with those who developed and perpetuate the standardized system (Weiston-Serdan, 2009). A standardized system is, then, inequitable. It creates unequal outcomes under the guise of creating a fair playing field (Lopez, 2003; Nolan, 2014).

# Foregrounding Equity in Definitions of “High Quality” Educators

In what follows, we expand upon existing dimensions of teacher quality to propose a framework that foregrounds equity within educators’ personal qualities, practice, and student outcomes (Kennedy, 2007) and with additional emphasis on cultural/community outcomes of schooling and educator reflexivity. We describe the components of this framework, as well as their interrelation.

## Personal Qualities

An educator’s personal qualities comprise her or his values and skills and knowledge. Great educators value all of their students and are committed to working with them, particularly in historically underserved communities (Sleeter, 2008). These educators value students’ existing social, cultural, and historical knowledge (Weiston-Serdan, 2009) and view students’ cultural and linguistic resources as assets for academic learning (Sleeter, 2008). Finally, so called “high quality” educators hold deep hope for their students and communities (Duncan-Andrade, 2009), and a love of knowledge and for the world (Assiter, 2013).

Great educators’ skills and knowledge include equity-informed pedagogical and content knowledge (Sleeter, 2008), awareness of students’ heritage practices, (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris, 2012) as well as understanding of situational contexts in which teaching and learning occur (Kennedy, 2010). Moreover, high quality educators also have knowledge of equity and oppression (in both content knowledge and practice), of the relationship between language,

culture and learning, of privilege, and of how schools contribute to inequity (Sleeter, 2008; Zeichner, 1996). Finally, quality educators have knowledge of themselves and how their own identities (race, gender, sexual orientation, disability status, etc.) position themselves and others in schools (Thorius & Scribner, 2013).

## Practice

Equity-minded educators leverage their personal qualities to enact critical pedagogies, which center the assets, needs, and value of all students. Waitoller and Thorius (under review) recently posed the expansion of Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies (Paris, 2012, Paris & Alim, 2014) through cross-pollination with Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (Rose, Meyer, & Hitchcock, 2005) as a way educators can bolster existing efforts toward inclusive education. UDL is a curriculum design framework which relies on educators’ providing all learners with:

- 1) Multiple means of **representation**, to give learners various ways of acquiring information and knowledge;
- 2) Multiple means of **expression**, to offer learners alternatives for demonstrating what they know; and
- 3) Multiple means of **engagement**, to tap into learners’ interests, challenge them appropriately, and motivate them to learn (Rose et al., 2005, pp. 3–4; citing Rose & Meyer, 2002).

But equity-minded educators simultaneously acknowledge and value the fact that classrooms are culturally and linguistically, as well as ability diverse. UDL does not explicitly address curriculum goals toward transforming and addressing cultural oppressions on the basis of race, class, gender, and dis/ability - the same oppressions experienced by many of the “poor and minority children” referenced in NCLB requirements. Toward such goals, recent conceptualizations of CSP (Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014) whose author(s) express appreciation for and extend an existing set of “asset pedagogies,” (e.g., Funds of Knowledge González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Culturally Responsive Pedagogy Ladson-Billings, 1995) provides valuable guidance.

With a CSP approach, educators actively work to promote learning; maintain students’ cultural, linguistic and historical heritage; and provide students with tools to understand and critique inequity and the social power structures that create inequity (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris, 2012). In practice, equity-minded educators identify vehicles for delivering critical pedagogies that resonate with students; they turn their classrooms into spaces for naming and critiquing local and global conditions for social, political, and economic exploitation; they create opportunities to apply students’ learning in ways that directly impact and improve students’ lives; and they make students’ reflection on their own learning and growth a pedagogical priority (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). And, when further bolstered by tenets of UDL, CSP ensures all learners are able to access learning content, and demonstrate their learning in varied ways.

Drawing from these pedagogies, high-quality educators work not only to reduce ability barriers to knowledge and expression but also to reduce cultural and linguistic barriers. They demonstrate a deep love of their students (Assiter, 2013) and their students’ lived experiences (Weiston-Serdan, 2009) by decentering themselves and learning about their students’ heritage and community practices.

## Student Outcomes



High quality educators are mindful of an array of desirable student outcomes, all tied to the values and beliefs underlying the pedagogies described above. Equity-minded educators will realize growth in student academic achievement, but they will also impact students’ personal and social growth, and, through and alongside students, a positive impact on the communities in which they teach. Educators do not have to choose between critical, social justice outcomes and academic achievement outcomes; this false binary is rooted in the belief that teaching in culturally sustaining ways cannot possibly lead to academic achievement due to the deficits in some students’ cultures (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). Indeed, empirical evidence suggests that pedagogies

like CSP can lead to desirable academic outcomes (Brayboy & Castagno, 2009; Sleeter, 2012).

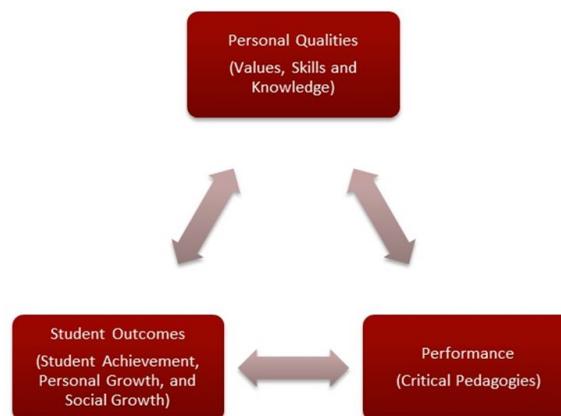
In terms of personal growth, high-quality educators facilitate students learning about themselves, their heritage, and the various identities they live throughout the day (Dahlin, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014). Individuals develop a sense of identity by interacting with others (Habermas, 1992). The same is true for learners interacting with peers and teachers throughout the school day. However, a good education experience should allow students the freedom and agency to identify and express those identities (through language, gender, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, religion, dis/ability, etc.) in ways that they choose. In general, personal growth means the student has the desire, means, and opportunity to be become who s/he wants to be (Biesta, 2010) and loving her/himself in the process (Assiter, 2013; Dahlin, 2012).

Social growth reflects the fact that the United States is becoming increasingly diverse and pluralistic (Nussbaum, 1997; Paris, 2012), which has several implications. First, some amount of socialization is necessary in order to live alongside others and participate in democratic society (Biesta, 2010). But simply being in the social world is insufficient. Students should be able to recognize how power and oppression shape their lives and should be equipped to name, resist, and counteract the injustice and inequity we all experience on a daily basis (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris, 2012). Furthermore, students must learn to love their own and others' cultures (Dahlin, 2012) and

imagine what it may be like to live as others live so they can be responsible and ethical citizens in a shared world (Arendt, 2003; Nussbaum, 1997). Finally, these pedagogies result in students' ability to access and question the standard curricular canon while preserving students' own heritage practices. This outcome grants access to a wider audience in a diverse society, which is in itself a path to power for historically underserved students (Paris & Alim, 2014).

## Integration and Reflexivity

The teacher quality model ascendant in current policy context is implicitly linear. It assumes an educator's personal qualities shape her performance, and that her performance leads to student outcomes. We instead suggest these domains are not linear, but that they are mutually informing and mediating. Accordingly, we extend Kennedy's (2007) model (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2. Mutually mediated definition of a high quality educator. This model emphasizes equity and educator reflexivity.**

Our extensions to Kennedy's original work highlight the mutual influence the three domains have on each other. Student outcomes should feed back into change of practices, but outcomes are also determined in part by an educator's own personal resources. This is because outcomes are socially constructed and, in part, value-based judgments. Additionally, a great educator should be learning and growing from interactions with students and their communities, so performance and outcomes shape the educator's skills and knowledge as well as her values.

Our definition of a high quality educator is one who is reflexive. These educators are mindful of themselves, their identities, and the ways in which their performances shape student outcomes. Reflexivity is a crucial part of professional growth and learning and allows educators to consider how their pasts influence how they experience the present (Moore, 2007). It can also help dismantle internalized stereotypes as educators examine their own identities and explore differences they have with their students (Asher, 2007; Lorde, 1984; Milner, 2006).

## Conclusion



Policymakers' attention to how high quality educators are distributed is understandable and should be lauded. However, particularly given concerns for underserved students out of teacher-quality legislation emerged, we offer considerations for an equity-focused framework that defines a high quality educator as one who:

- 1) Views students' existing cultural resources as assets;
- 2) Applies these assets within critical pedagogies toward empowering students in their lives and communities; and in doing so...
- 3) Fosters students' academic, social, and personal growth.

Equity-minded educators are reflexive and open to ways in which their professional practice and interactions with students may (will) change their own values, skills, and knowledge. They are also be aware of how their own identities affect their understandings.



### **About the Great Lakes Equity Center**

The mission of the Great Lakes Equity Center is to ensure equity in student access to and participation in high quality, research-based education by expanding states' and school systems' capacity to provide robust, effective opportunities to learn for all students, regardless of and responsive to race, sex, and national origin, and to reduce disparities in educational outcomes among and between groups. The Equity by Design briefs series is intended to provide vital background information and action steps to support educators and other equity advocates as they work to create positive educational environments for all children. For more information, visit:

<http://www.greatlakesequitycenter.org>.

### **Disclaimer**

Great Lakes Equity Center is committed to the sharing of information regarding issues of equity in education. The contents of this practitioner brief were developed under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education. However, these contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the federal government.

## References

- Amrein-Beardsley, A. (2008). Methodological concerns about the Education Value-Added Assessment System. *Educational Researcher*, 37(2), 65–75.
- Arendt, H. (2003). Some questions of moral philosophy. In J. Kohn (Ed.), *Responsibility and judgment* (pp. 49–146). New York, NY: Schocken Books.
- Asher, N. (2007). Made in the (multicultural) U.S.A.: Unpacking tensions of race, culture, gender, and sexuality in education. *Educational Researcher*, 36(2), 65–73.
- Assiter, A. (2013). Love, Socrates, and Pedagogy. *Educational Theory*, 63(3), 253–263.
- Biesta, G. J. J. (2010). *Good education in an age of measurement: Ethics, politics, democracy*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers.
- Brayboy, B. M. J., & Castagno, A. E. (2009). Self-determination through self-education: Culturally responsive schooling for Indigenous students in the USA. *Teaching Education*, 20(1), 31–53.
- Dahlin, B. (2012). The purpose of education: A “post-liberal” perspective. In S. Suggate & E. Reese (Eds.), *Contemporary debates in childhood education and development* (pp. 3–11). London, UK: Routledge.
- Duncan, A. (2014, July 7). Letter to Chief State School Officers regarding State Educator Equity Plans. Retrieved March 5, 2015, from <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/guid/secletter/140707.html>
- Duncan-Andrade, J. M. R. (2009). Note to educators: Hope required when growing roses in concrete. *Harvard Educational Review*, 79(2), 181–194.
- Duncan-Andrade, J. M. R., & Morrell, E. (2008). *The art of critical pedagogy: Possibilities for moving from theory to practice in urban schools*. New York: Peter Lang.
- González, N., Moll, L. C., & Amanti, C. (Eds.). (2005). *Funds of knowledge: Theorizing practices in households, communities, and classrooms*. Mahwah, NJ: L. Erlbaum Associates.
- Great Lakes Equity Center. (2012). *Equity dispatch: Educational equity*. Indianapolis, IN: Great Lakes Equity Center. Retrieved from <http://www.icontact-archive.com/Gp73aByODKFDtKXRRloPNd5Zrdm6ZxRY?w=3>
- Guarino, C. M., Santibañez, L., & Daley, G. A. (2006). Teacher recruitment and retention: A review of the recent empirical literature. *Review of Educational Research*, 76(2), 173–208.
- Habermas, J. (1992). Individuation through socialization: On George Herbert Mead’s theory of subjectivity. In W. M. Hohengarten (Trans.), *Postmetaphysical thinking: Philosophical essays* (pp. 149–204). Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Hanushek, E. A., & Rivkin, S. G. (2006). Teacher quality. In E. A. Hanushek & F. Welch (Eds.), *Handbook of the Economics of Education* (pp. 1051–1078). Amsterdam: North-Holland.
- Hanushek, E. A., & Rivkin, S. G. (2010). Generalizations about using value-added measures of teacher quality. *The American Economic Review*, 100(2), 267–271.
- Harvey, D. (2005). *A brief history of neoliberalism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kennedy, M. M. (2007). Monitoring and assessing teacher quality. Presented at the The Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, IL.
- Kennedy, M. M. (2010). Attribution error and the quest for teacher quality. *Educational Researcher*, 39(8), 591–598.
- Kincheloe, J. L. (2004). *Critical pedagogy primer*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). Toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. *American Educational Research Journal*, 32(3), 465–491.
- Lopez, G. R. (2003). The (racially neutral) politics of education: A critical race theory perspective. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 39(1), 68–94.
- Lorde, A. (1984). The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. In *Sister outsider: Essays and speeches* (pp. 110–114). Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press.
- McDermott, R., & Varenne, H. (1999). Adam, Adam, Adam, and Adam: The cultural construction of a learning disability. In H. Varenne & R. McDermott (Eds.), *Successful failure: The school America builds* (pp. 25–

- 44). Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- McNeil, M. (2014, February 19). Scrutiny rises on placement of best teachers. *Education Week*. Retrieved from [http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2014/02/19/21equity\\_ep.h33.html](http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2014/02/19/21equity_ep.h33.html)
- Milner, H. R. (2006). Preservice teachers' learning about cultural and racial diversity implications for urban education. *Urban Education, 41*(4), 343–375.
- Moore, A. (2007). Understanding the social self: The role and importance of reflexivity in schoolteachers' professional learning. In T. Townsend & R. Bates (Eds.), *Handbook of Teacher Education* (pp. 571–584). Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer Netherlands. Retrieved from [http://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/1-4020-4773-8\\_39](http://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/1-4020-4773-8_39)
- No Child Left Behind, Title 1 U.S.C. § 1111 (2001).
- Nolan, K. (2014). Neoliberal common sense and race-neutral discourses: A critique of “evidence-based” policy-making in school policing. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education, 1*–14.
- Nussbaum, M. C. (1997). *Cultivating humanity: A classical defense of reform in liberal education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Paris, D. (2012). Culturally sustaining pedagogy: A needed change in stance, terminology, and practice. *Educational Researcher, 41*(3), 93–97.
- Paris, D., & Alim, H. S. (2014). What are we seeking to sustain through Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy? A loving critique forward. *Harvard Educational Review, 84*(1), 85–100.
- Rose, D. H., & Meyer, A. (2002). *Teaching every student in the Digital Age: Universal design for learning*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Rose, D. H., Meyer, A., & Hitchcock, C. (Eds.). (2005). *The universally designed classroom: Accessible curriculum and digital technologies*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
- Shor, I. (1993). Education is politics. In P. McLaren & P. Leonard (Eds.), *Paulo Freire: A critical encounter* (pp. 24–35). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Sleeter, C. E. (2008). Equity, democracy, and neoliberal assaults on teacher education. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 24*(8), 1947–1957.
- Sleeter, C. E. (2012). Confronting the marginalization of culturally responsive pedagogy. *Urban Education, 47*(3), 562–584.
- Spellings, M. (2006, September 5). Letter to Chief State School Officers regarding efforts to ensure that all core academic subjects are taught by highly qualified and experienced teachers, and encouraging states to eliminate use of HOUSSE procedures. Retrieved from <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/guid/secletter/060905.html>
- Spring, J. H. (1998). *Education and the rise of the global economy*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Spring, J. H. (2011). *The politics of American education*. New York: Routledge.
- Tefera, A., Thorius, K. A. K., & Ariles, A. J. (2014). Teacher influences in the racialization of disabilities. In H. R. Milner & K. Lomotey (Eds.), *Handbook of urban education* (pp. 256–270). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Waitoller, F. R., & Thorius, K. A. K. (under review). Cross-pollinating Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies with Universal Design for Learning: Toward an inclusive pedagogy that accounts for student dis/ability.
- Weiston-Serdan, T. L. (2009). A radical redistribution of capital. *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies (JCEPS), 7*(2), 394–417.
- Zeichner, K. M. (1996). Educating teachers for cultural diversity. In K. M. Zeichner, S. L. Melnick, & M. L. Gomez (Eds.), *Currents of reform in preservice teacher education* (pp. 133–175). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

**GREAT LAKES**  
**EQUITY**  
**CENTER**

**IUPUI**

**ED.gov**



**INDIANA UNIVERSITY**  
SCHOOL OF EDUCATION  
IUPUI